# Winning and Losing

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**Resumen**: Este trabajo es el punto de partida de un proyecto de investigación que aborda el tema :" Comunicación y Cooperación: la acción del lenguaje en el espacio social de las organizaciones". Basado en algunos principios constructivistas y su aplicación en juegos, el artículo intenta identificar situaciones competitivas en el ambiente de trabajo, analizar situaciones de victoria y derrota dentro de las organizaciones y cómo sus protagonistas manejaran las mismas. Finalmente, ofrece algunas reflexiones sobre los varios significados que la competencia puede asumir.

**Abstract**: *: This work is a starting point of a research project inside the subject: "Communication and Cooperation. The language actions in the organizations' social space" based on some constructivist principles and their application to games. The author intends to identify competitive situations in working environment, analyze victory and defeat situations inside organizations and how their protagonists have been dealt with, and finally, offer some reflections on the various meanings that competitions can take over.*

Competing is what matters, not winning. This is the motto used to comfort losers in sports competitions, especially when children and teenagers are involved. But if we look closely at the sports pages of newspapers, we can see that, lately, soccer games have become fierce competitions in which aggressive tactics are being used to eliminate rivals from the match or even from the championship. The attitude is not different among supporters who engage in pitched battles attacking one another or the defeated team. As to winners, they are worshipped and hailed as national heroes.

Most management theories that have appeared since Taylor's days aim almost exclusively at success and never deal with how to cope with failure. Expressions such as total quality, top of marketing, advertisement prize, etc., as well as records showing successful performances of departments or employees, or, else, titles of books like Innovation: the attackers advantage, all glorify success and encourage competitive strategies on the part of the organization. Only success deserves attention and praise, while losers are to be set aside.

Some people may question about the real value of such attitude or what type of human beings may be emerging from this reality, while

others regard it as a learning challenge or a good opportunity for self-knowledge. How painful or gratifying can these lessons be?

Based on some constructivist principles and their application to games, the present paper intends to identify competitive situations in working environments, analyze victory and defeat situations in organizations and how these can be dealt with, and, finally, offer some reflections on the various meanings competition can assume. The plea for competitiveness among organizations —but, above all, for competitiveness among companies of the private sector— has been, under the cover of globalization, the word of command. It is as if by taking the piece of advice: be more competitive and you'll be a winner, the doors to success would be automatically opened. The message —sometimes explicit, sometimes surreptitious— is that "it all depends on you, on your company knowing how to play competitively". But, if competitiveness is a game, it presumes the existence of partners or competitors also willing to win. And this presupposition includes both the market game, therefore the competition among companies, and the internal game that accounts for the organizational culture and atmosphere. The present paper aims at demonstrating a few contradictions of this presupposition, and the potential implications if one is to follow it without appraising the consequences to the human beings who work in these environments and, consequently, to the organizations themselves.

In the first place, these implications may emerge from a misconceived view of what competing is. So, what is the common acceptation of competing? And, how does such notion identify or come into conflict with a theoretical approach such as the constructivist principles of the human learning process based on Piaget's theory?

The generally accepted meaning of competing is 'to enter a game to come out as a winner'. Nevertheless, when referring to the subject, a person may come up with the following assertion: "Competing is what matters, not winning." This is the motto used to comfort losers in sports competitions, especially when children and teenagers are involved. But if we look closely at sports news, we can see that, lately, soccer games have become fierce competitions in which aggressive tactics are being used to eliminate rivals from the match or even from the championship. The attitude is not different among supporters, who engage in pitched battles attacking one another or the defeated team.

As to winners, they are worshipped and hailed as national heroes. And the one thing said about the rebels, the insubordinate, the unyielding, or the questioners in face of defeat is that they do not have the "spirit of sports" or that they don't know what to do in order to demonstrate that they "know better". Thus, what one observes as being another part of the so-called "spirit of sports" is the ability to accept that winning is not always possible, specially since chance is always involved, and since we depend on the other competitors and their preparation. But what becomes visible in this attitude is the exalting of "cleverness" in place of balance and judiciousness, and the exalting of the "spirit of conquering" by use of any means and under any conditions, instead of a "spirit of fighting".

In the business world, and in the name of competitiveness, a similar logic can be observed. This logic emphasizes that only the individual or the organization accounts for "victory", thus disregarding the external conditions both in terms of the organization in the market game, and the individual inside the organization. After all, what does competing mean?

**Competition: one extreme of a continuum**

It is presumed here that competition and cooperation are two extremes of a continuum which has numerable nuances in between. Hertneky (1996: 62) presents a similar view: "Strange as it may seem, competition and cooperation are two sides of the same coin. In fact, competition's Latin root, competere, means to strive together. (...) Indeed, the most aggressive competitors are often the most cooperative."

However, in a different context, in child education, the word *competition* is loaded with negative connotations and teachers are rightly concerned about the type of competition which evokes rivalry and feelings of failure and rejection. The justifications of educators against group games may be summarized as follows:

1) Children are already too competitive, and we (teachers) should not put them in situations that will make them even more competitive;

2) In our occidental society, there is already enough competitiveness, and soon children will be exposed to it;

3) The games distress children who lose; and,

4) Children must compete against themselves and not against each other (Kamii, 1991: 269). Kamii agrees that some people are more competitive than others and that, because of it, we can talk about competitiveness in terms of a personality trait. But, for her, the competition in games played by small children differs from a personality trait. And she justifies this by saying that, when a child fights for a toy, he or she is fighting for something which is of intrinsic and immediate value for him or her, such as for the attention of a grown-up, or even for the satisfaction of being the one to, for example, serve the juice during a meal.

In interviews with company consultants carried out for the present paper, it was highlighted by employees (therefore by adults) that one of the reasons for internal competition in the organization was precisely to get the attention of the boss. Consequently, the search for the attention of someone considered important seems to potentiate competitive behaviors not only among children but also among adults.

But Kamii (1991: 269-70) also affirms that games do not always involve privileges or attractive objects; and exemplifies by saying that nothing is won, for example, by finishing a race in first place. What in fact occurs in situations like this is that, even if there are no material compensations –as in the sports games–, there are the symbolic compensations present in the acknowledgment from partners, from referees (no matter if the school teacher or the company superior), or in the applause of spectators (either the classmates or the workmates).

There is still another interesting aspect imbedded in competition: the difference between comparing drawings and competing. According to Kamii (1991: 272), the first is a necessary condition but not sufficient for the latter, since competition is a comparison plus something else, i.e., the attempt to excel or overcome the others. In this case the child becomes proud of him or herself, aggressive, and offensive. Such a situation aggravates when adults encourage the feeling of superiority of the child, bestowing prizes, and usually overvaluing 'winning', since "its glorification invests the winner with a feeling of superiority, and the loser with a feeling of failure. When adults deal wrongly and destructively with competition, it becomes highly undesirable".

This assertion seems also valid in the constitution of the organizational atmosphere, as it will be further examined when we deal with some effects of competitive games in the organizations.

But Kamii disagrees with the justification given by the opposers of the encouragement of competitive games that there is already too much competitiveness in our society, and that children will become competitive too soon, if they play such games. She affirms that, at least in three ways, competition in a socioeconomic system differs from the competition in games, for, in a socioeconomic system:

1) The aim is a material gain;

2) Competitors are permanently trying to eliminate each other; and

3) Competitors do not assent to the rules prior to entering the competition.

Let us examine the first of the three: The aim is a material gain. Contrary to this idea is the fact that, once again, in interviews made for this paper, competition in companies appeared as a means of getting the attention of the boss, what is not necessarily related to material gains. But, even in children's games, as in the games played in parties, there are prizes for the winners. The second: The competitors are permanently trying to eliminate each other. In fact, this happens frequently in the business environment. However, statements of executives, such as Coreno (1996) and Hertneky (1996) describe, point to various directions, like the alliance among competitors around a common problem or, instead of competing for the same product, the creation of their own specialized niche in the market. And Moore (1996:78) affirms:

> *Competition, as we've known it, is dead. Not that competition is vanishing, in fact it is intensifying. But we need to think about it differently. The traditional way to view competition is in terms of products and markets. Your product or service goes up against that of your competitor, and one wins. That's still important, but this point of view ignores the context - the environment - within which the business lies. Companies need to coevolve with others in the environment, a process that involves cooperation as well as conflict. It takes generating shared visions, forming alliances, negotiating deals, and managing complex relationships. (...) When companies look at the picture, when they understand that sometimes it's better to coevolve rather than compete with a rival, it can make all parties stronger."*

Thus, there is evidence to support the idea that not always the elimination of the competitor is the main target of companies in the competitive game of the market. The third aspect is that:

> *competitors do not assent to the rules prior to entering the competition. In a run for natural resources, for instance, the competitors do not agree beforehand on starting at the same time, from the same place, nor on covering the same distance. In a game there is neither material gain nor the accumulation of richness, and the elimination or gain has effect only during certain periods of time. Those who do not play honestly are constantly rejected by the group and do not even have the chance to compete* (Kamii, 1991:278).

In fact, this a substantial difference between competition in games and competition in the market.

## Cooperation: the other extreme of the continuum

When we have as starting point the presupposition that competition integrates a continuum whose gradation and nuances lead to or may mingle with cooperation, it is important to take time to examine its meaning. In some cases, it is common to hear something like "We expect your cooperation". And this saying may be common in superior-subordinate relationships to indicate —in a non-directly imperative way— a choice to be made, or that a person's adherence to something previously decided without his or her participation is expected. In such cases, it is usually implicit that one's approval or consent is being expected. This is the customary meaning related to consent: the expectation of adherence to a cause or of one's compromising with whatever is at issue, no matter it is a task or a decision already taken.

However, as Kamii and De Vries (1991: 21) appropriately alert, when Piaget uses the term cooperation he means co-operate (hyphenated), to operate together or to negotiate to reach an agreement that seems adequate to all those involved. This does not mean the absence of diversion of opinions. Cooperation sometimes involves conflicts and quarrels. But, according to Piaget, what matters is that cooperation with other individuals allows for the development of morality and autonomy, preconditions for the establishment of a relationship of mutual respect between parties.

In relation to the way children build cooperation, these two authors, Kamii y Vries (1991), point out to the fact that, if this relationship of mutual respect is present, noisy children may, in the moment of

dispute, voluntarily build a rule to keep fairly quiet. And, how do they build cooperation with the group? They build a rule for themselves when they reach their own conclusions through decentration and through being able to see from other people's points of view.

When knowledge and moral values are apprehended, not via interiorization of external elements to the subject, but via an interior construction leveraged by the interaction of the subject with the environment, we are facing constructivism - the most fundamental principle one can extract from Piaget's theory. On the contrary, when set rules, such as "do not speak", are imposed and forced, they remain external, something to be obeyed only when someone reinforces them as sanctions. Piaget's version on the learning process is that new knowledge is developed by the active modification that the child undergoes in his or her own previous knowledge, and not via an additive process similar to a piling up of bricks (Kamii and De Vries, 1991:18-19).

It is being suggested here that this does not happen only with individuals in formation, as children. Something similar seems to occur, also, at the level of the relationships among companies as in the interior of the organizations themselves. The entrepreneur of the food line of business Ed Fisher, interviewed by Hertneky (1996: 59), stated that "competition sparks his imagination"; in that he looks for new solutions for his business instead of reproducing what his competitor does. In other words, he aims at actively modifying his own previous knowledge through an interior construction, leveraged by the interaction with his environment.

However, in the business world, there are numerous situations in which rules imposed arbitrarily boost individualistic behaviors, of strict obedience to these rules, hence not compromised with the aims and even non-cooperative. Therefore we can conclude that a precondition for cooperation resides in the acceptance of rules established by mutual agreement or, at least, consented, as in the case of union and employer negotiations. Coreno (1996:15-16) illustrates situations of cooperation between competitor companies, in which the establishment of agreements and liabilities led to new business situations. In other words: in the context of the competitive game between companies, cooperation meant to operate together and to negotiate rules that seemed fair for everyone.

The concept of justice is essential because it gives the basis to a moral rule. Transporting this to a macro level means the conceiving of society do way Rawls conceives it (1981): as an equitable system of cooperation among free and equal people. Such definition implies the idea that cooperation is guided by norms and proceedings publicly recognized, accepted as appropriate regulatory mechanisms of mutual conducts. Equitable terms in the cooperation specify the idea of reciprocity and mutuality, that is to say, they are terms that each participant may accept, provided all the others also accept them. In human societies, this means a notion of political justice characterizing the equitable terms of social cooperation. As Piaget made evident, the cooperation supposes the codification of rules between participants. Consequently, cooperation with other individuals allows for the development of morality and autonomy.

But what is autonomy? This is an important issue since companies advertise the need for employees with initiative, spirit of fighting, and willing to "die for the organization". Is autonomy the same as independence? According to constructivism, the autonomous persons have their own convictions on what is right and what is wrong within a specific set of circumstances. Their judgements are not governed by reward or punishment.

The difference between autonomy and independence resides on the fact that the autonomous individual goes beyond conventions, seeing them as a set of rules within many other possibilities, and is someone who adopts conventional rules solely in certain circumstances, when they are meaningful to him or her (Kamii and De Vries, 1991: 20-23). This may be one of the most conflicting aspects between the Piagetian theory and what goes on in the world of organizations. In the organization, the decentralization and the autonomy are proclaimed, but it is well known that, as is the case in championships, there are rewards and punishments for, respectively, victories and defeats. On the latter, in these times of downsizing, reengineering, and other "tools" for the restructuring of companies, the menace of unemployment for the individual is perhaps the most dramatic punishment in terms of the restraint of autonomy.

Finally, the idea of cooperation, according to Rawls, also involves the idea of rational advantage or the well being of each participant. It means what those involved in the cooperation – independent of being

individuals, families, associations, or even national states –are trying to obtain, when the scheme is considered from their point of view. However, the idea of gaining is also present in the competitive game, what leads us to the confirmation of the interrelationship between competition and cooperation. This becomes clearer when we examine the levels in games according to the researches of Piaget, and relate some of them to some aspects of what occurs in the organizations.

## The game and its stages

From the observation of children playing and from interviewing them, Piaget identified four levels in games:

1. Motor and individual game.
2. Egocentric game (from age 2 to 5).
3. Incipient cooperation.
4. Codification of rules.

The first is the level of discovery of the person's own body and environment, and of the exercise of motor skills. In the egocentric game, children imitate their older classmates but play alone, without having to go through the effort of looking for a partner, or they play with other children without trying to win. If they are playing and not paying attention to anyone and, afterwards, are asked with whom they were playing, they reply: "with myself". When we ask if they prefer to play alone, the answer is: "You do not need two (people), you can play alone". Although they have already mastered motor skills that enable them to play, from the child's perspective, the other players are irrelevant. Small children are quite egocentric to become interested in what others are doing.

Here an explanation is pertinent. As Kamii and De Vries (1991: 33) point out:

> *The term 'egocentrism' is sometimes misunderstood and mistaken for 'selfishness', which means doing something for one's self, even knowing that this act is not suitable or hurts another person. Egocentrism is different from selfishness in that it refers to the total incapacity of seeing another point of view. Children aged three to four are interested only in what they do, and it doesn't occur to them to compare their performance with someone else's.*

Well, this capacity to get interested in what others do and to comppare it with one's own, the child only achieves by decentralizing and putting him or herself in the place of other players. This is how

children begin to compare their performances and to coordinate the intentions of different players. This is what enables the third level, of incipient cooperation, in which each player tries to win. At this level, (at about 5 years of age) it does not mean that the behavior of the child will change completely, however, the child starts to demonstrate a "competitive attitude". The child decentralizes enough to be able to compare and recognize contrary intentions of players. It is at this level that children try to win. When no one is trying to win, there is no need for rules to be subject to comparison. But, when competition emerges, children have to cooperate to reach an agreement on rules.

This is the condition for the next level: the codification of rules. It is why —in the context of games— to cooperate is not to consent with a request, but to operate together and negotiate rules that seem fair for everyone. This demands the development of a broader skill: being able to decentralize and coordinate points of view. And here we reach a point to be further examined in order for us to better understand what goes on in organizations.

First, a definition of game is needed; so that we can establish relations for the organizational territories. The broadest definition of 'game' directs us to its entertaining aspect and presents it as a synonym to 'fun', 'amusement', or 'pastime', and can be both individual or related to groups. A good example of this understanding is given by Tara Lapinski, the youngest champion in figure skating championships in the United States. When asked about her strategies for winning competitions, she answered that the most important was not to get obsessed by the idea of winning, and that she would even forget the competition at all when doing her routine; so that, when competing, she gets totally absorbed by the pleasure of ice skating and perceives it just as fun. Certainly this is the attitude to fight stress, both in championships and in organizations: to recognize the entertaining and/or learning aspects of each experience.

However, there are other definitions of 'game', such as that of Gove (1961), De Vries, (1991: 3) that refer to "a physical or mental competition conducted according to rules in which each participant plays in direct opposition to the others, each trying to win or to prevent the opponent from winning". According to the Encyclopedia Americana, (1957: 266) (De Vries, 1991:3), "In games, there are prescribed attitudes, subject to rules, and penalties for disobedience of

such rules; and actions behave in an evolutionary way until they culminate in a climax that consists, usually, of a victory of skills, time, or strength".

For De Vries, games apply to this definition except for the aspect of competition aiming victory, since the author seeks the characterization of good infant games in which the possibility of winning is not essential. To help children reach the fourth level, it is important that rules are established either by consensus or convention, and that these rules are of cooperation, because the game cannot be played unless the players agree mutually with the rules, cooperate in following them, and accept their consequences. And here lies a major similarity in respect to sports games in championships and the competition that is often established within companies. In both cases the aim is victory. And we must focus on another point of convergence: what every player must do in roles that are interdependent, opposite, and cooperative.

The existence of interdependency and opposite intentions in the search for the accomplishment of aims implies the possibility of using strategies. In short: in order to be a game there must exist the possibility of opposition and actions, and, thus, of the elaboration of strategies.

## Games in the organizational territories

In an organization, competitive strategies assume multiple dispositions. Based on an exploratory study carried out having as starting point the statements of human resources managers, consultants, and ex-managers, some features of competition that seem to permeate the organizational environment will be presented. However, this analysis does not intend to be exhaustive. When analyzing these competitive strategies, it must be kept in mind that, in a game, at least two elements are involved: competitors and rules. But, differently from infant and sportive games, in the organization, the rules of games are not always explicit; at least not all of them.

## Rational objectiveness vs. hidden competition

Rational objectiveness is the business card of organizations. But behind it there may be a hidden competitiveness diverse from that characterized by some as "a healthy competition in which aggressiveness is used in favor of the company". Rational objectiveness has to do with the exteriorization of the organization and

under it may be occulted what goes on in the "locker rooms" of competition. In them, the "uniform" of the ever present smile is put on; the attitude of the "being brilliant and, if possible, more perfect than the colleague". These attitudes —expected as cooperation— carry the implicit message of an instrumental rationality as an expression of competence and usefulness: to smile, to agree, to show results, all are useful in the competitive game to ascend in a career or, at least, (in the era of "downsizing" and reengineering), to secure one's job.

## Effects of competitive games on organizations

One of the situations in which hidden competition operates is in the process of socialization of neophytes. When the new employee or superior starts in the organization, it is possible that hidden competition appears due to the feelings of menace, as well as the fear of losing something that the ones who have been longer in the organization may feel. For the neophytes, what happens is that the rules of the game are not clear, demanding constant attention on their part, what may lead ultimately to physical, intellectual, and moral stress.

Among the competitive strategies presented, one may include the resistance to the neophyte, which may cause his or her non-familiarization to practical aspects of everyday work so that he or she makes mistakes, delays the carrying out of tasks, and has to learn things the hard way. Another common situation encountered in companies is the designation of a tutor or "trainee", whose lack of time, patience, and interest generates stress at work and in the neophyte-tutor relationship.

The simultaneous report during training of two employees having the same occupation, in which the mistakes of one are reported to the other, privately, also happens. Sentences like, "See what he did wrong! He will never have a future in the company", are common. Another strategy of encouragement of competition is saying to both: "I want to see which of my apprentices does better", and to each one, separately, say, "You are better than him!"

When the encouragement of competition from superior ranks of the organization is very intense, it generates an opposit effect, since situations of tension and stress contaminate all the hierarchical levels. Although competition becomes more subtle and surreptitious in the superior levels, as in the management, it is very likely that its effects

will recoil in all the organization, undermining the existence of socially built explicit rules, and the autonomy, as constructivism proclaims.

Specific situations of competition in this hierarchical level consist in the attribution of "dumb" or mechanical tasks, such as the storing of data in a computer, the control of an operating table to one of the neophytes; or not including them in visits to important clients, or in lectures or business opportunities not held within the company.

Another strategy is to give contradictory messages, such as, "I count on you!", but never ask the person to do something considered important in the scope of the organization. As Soares (1998) rightly puts: "There are more subtle ways to impose retaliation than the punishment itself, for example, intentionally not listening to suggestions. This deprives people from their space". It is the technique of exclusion, isolation of the competitor or possible rival. For the individual victimized by this process, the consequence is insecurity, distrust in the person's own capacity to perform, and the consequent lowering of self-esteem. It is the stigma of the loser.

Finally, one of the conclusions one can reach about excessive competition is that, at its least, it generates an atmosphere of great insecurity in the organization, and, in its most, it makes the individuals and the team become "ill", as Enriquez (1997) points out. Besides, excessive levels of rivalry lead to excessive control, in which "the man is the wolf of the man".

## Analogy between the stages of games in children and competition/cooperation in organizations

Many inferences may be drawn from findings based on Piagetian research for life in the organization. As Constance Kamii, Piaget's follower, (1991: 283) declares:

> *Piaget's theory demonstrates that competition in games is part of a broader development, that goes from egocentrism to an increasing ability to decentralize and to coordinate points of view. This process of development may be seen not only in games, but also in moral judgement, in language, in classification, in conservation, in the construction of a spatial-temporal structure and in causality.*

A good example given by the author is of the egocentric talk that in children is developed from monologue to the collective monologue, and which isn't yet a dialogue, since one cannot take into consideration the point of view of the other. In order to talk and communicate, the

child has to decentralize and use points of reference in common with other people so that they may pay attention and understand him or her. This is possible only through talking and listening to others; hence, the need of activities that stimulate this kind of interaction, as games in group. In the organization, the possibility of a communication that accepts conflict and different points of view as a condition to understanding seems an important lesson to be drawn from the fourth level of games detected by Piaget, (if the intention is for individuals and teams to build rules of convenience that incorporate cooperation as a counterpart of competition).

In this manner, two consultants interviewed declared that they had used group games with employees. Thus, the existing problems in the company could be verbalized and the way employees interrelate among each other and with managers could emerge clearly. Situations like seeking a scapegoat for what is not well in the group, and blaming and accusing in the game made evident competitive and cooperative aspects present in the team. This method is a helpful tool for the understanding that communication within organizations is a vast field of study for which research, such as that of Piaget, may provide interesting contributions in relation to human beings in face of challenging situations.

Challenging situations are quite evident in games, and are certainly present in the organizational environment, above all in the processes of mergings and privatizations, when staff from different backgrounds must suddenly share the same space. In the words of a consultant who made use of the strategy of enabling the emergence of latent competition and insecurity, the game "allowed the participants to verbalize, share, and recognize in the others the same problems and feelings" (Batista, 1998 in recent statement).

Still in relation to talk, Kamii (1991: 36) believes many parallels can be drawn between egocentric talk and the egocentric way of playing, since the two occur due to the difficulty of taking into consideration the point of view of the others. Being able to establish a dialogue and play games in group demonstrates an important a transition from the egocentric stage to a higher and more socialized level of thinking. According to her, "the history of science is one of constant decentralization, coordination, and objectiveness of points of view. The transition of egocentrism to a more coordinated way of thinking

characterizes the development of all the aspects of thinking" And this seems to be a process that does not end when we reach adult life, it is a constant conquering. Most people in their working environments do not know how to listen, they mishear each other in the interchange needed for the activities to be developed. And this ends up by being transformed in a not so conscious game of winning-losing. In this game, one acts as children do in the early stages, not interacting with the others, rather enclosing themselves in their world. In such situations, many are the ones to lose; not only the individuals, but the whole, the organization itself. In the organization, if one wishes the individuals not to withdraw to an egocentric stage, it is imperative that possibilities are established in the organizational culture and atmosphere enabling for substantial communication.

A good example of this, also mentioned by Kamii, consists in the elaboration of the golden rule, "*Don't do to others what you don't want people do to yourself*", that takes many years to be built. Partly by suffering injustices, children are able to see a situation from the point of view of the weaker ones, and, afterwards, to build a golden rule for themselves. Perhaps these situations of loss may also lead to the construction and to the observation of rules of mutual respect in organizations, to another ethic, or to other ethics, as wishes Enriquez (1997c).

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